

**STATE OF CONNECTICUT
OFFICE OF THE CHILD ADVOCATE
18-20 TRINITY STREET, HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT 06105**



**Sarah Healy Eagan
Acting Child Advocate**

Senator McCrory, Representative Sanchez, Senator Berthel, Representative McCarty, and all distinguished members of the Education Committee, this testimony is being submitted on behalf of the Office of the Child Advocate (“OCA”) in response to the following Bills. The obligations of the OCA are to review, investigate, and make recommendations regarding how our publicly funded state and local systems meet the needs of vulnerable children.

H.B. No. 6535 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING ISSUES RELATING TO SCHOOL SECURITY.

OCA supports continued efforts to examine school security and, in particular, strategies to eliminate reliance on law enforcement from schools. However, though this bill encourages a dialogue on these critical topics, the proposed group lacks representation from parents, youth, disability advocates and civil rights advocates.

OCA notes that a 2019 report from CT Voices for Children examining the impact of school resource officers in Connecticut, *Policing Connecticut’s Hallways: The Prevalence and Impact of School Resource Officers in Connecticut* (April 2019)¹ found that the presence of police officers in Connecticut schools led to greater risk of student suspension and arrest for Latino students. In fact, CT Voices found that “the average arrest rate of Latino students at schools with an SRO was six times greater than the average arrest rate of Latino students without an SRO,” while schools with SROs also reported “higher levels of school policy violations, such as skipping class, insubordination, or using profanity.”² Connecticut data likewise persistently and alarmingly shows that school discipline, specifically school suspensions, are also disproportionately meted out to Black and Hispanic students.

OCA also has significant concerns about the use of law enforcement to respond to children’s mental health crises in schools. In September, 2020, OCA published an investigation into one urban school district’s utilization of police in response to the crisis behavior of children in PreK through Grade 8 schools. OCA found that children as young as 7, 8, and 9 years old were subject to a police response after exhibiting dysregulated and suicidal or self-harming behavior, with some children even

¹ <https://ctvoices.org/publication/policing-connecticuts-hallways-the-prevalence-and-impact-of-school-resource-officers-in-connecticut/>.

² Id.

handcuffed during these encounters.³ OCA found that the district called police almost 200 times in a six month period of time during the 2018-19 school year, resulting in 36 arrests of students, including nine students under the age of 11.

Under-resourced or unsupported school administrators may resort to relying on police to respond to children's behavioral health crises and see police intervention as a rapid way to address a child's escalating crisis or even as an effective strategy to access hospitalization and mental health support for a child. Police are not well-equipped to manage the mental health crises and behavioral health needs of children, particularly children who are trauma-exposed or who have a disability. We cannot ask police to do the work that systems of care should be doing, and we cannot subject children to the harms created by not investing in the continuum of services and curriculum that should be available to students and educational staff.

Use of law enforcement also does not increase the likelihood of a child and their caregiver becoming well connected to needed supports.⁴ And ample research shows that early involvement with the justice system is strongly correlated to student arrest, student disengagement with school and dropping out. As stated in the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Division (SAMHSA) *National Guidelines for Behavioral Health Crisis*.

In many communities across the United States, the absence of sufficient and well-integrated mental health crisis care has made local law enforcement the de facto mental health mobile crisis system. This is unacceptable and unsafe... [While] the role of local law enforcement in addressing emergent public safety risk is essential and important. ... Unfortunately, well-intentioned law enforcement responders to a crisis call often escalate the situation solely based on the presence of police vehicles and armed officers that generate anxiety for far too many individuals in a crisis.⁵

Schools must have the resources, training and evaluation frameworks in place to support implementation of a school-wide behavioral support system. Even the best state or local mental health systems around the country estimate that they meet the needs of only **half** of children with behavioral health treatment needs. As children's needs go up and resources stay scarce, the implications for children's mental health are dire. As the State moves through the COVID-19 pandemic, the support needs for children, families and educators is higher than ever. Resources cannot continue to be invested in a law enforcement response to children in crisis.

***S.B. No. 945 (RAISED)**

AN ACT IMPLEMENTING THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION.

³ OCA's report is available on the web at: <https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/OCA/OCA-Recent-Publications/OCA-Report--Final-Waterbury-Report-September-1-2020.pdf>.

⁴ <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/national-guidelines-for-behavioral-health-crisis-care-02242020.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/national-guidelines-for-behavioral-health-crisis-care-02242020.pdf>

Section 1 of Raised Bill 945 addresses this issue by making transition planning mandatory for all students with disabilities in the Individualized Education Plan that takes effect when they are 14. OCA strongly supports this change, as transition planning is an urgent need for children with disabilities.

***S.B. No. 948 (RAISED)**

AN ACT ADDRESSING EDUCATION FUNDING AND RACIAL EQUITY IN CONNECTICUT.

OCA supports Senate Bill 948 which will promote equitable education funding for all students. The bill proposes increased funding for higher need students, provides increased funds for school districts pursuant to a more urgent timeframe, and will help reduce intolerable disparities in how low-income children and children of color access education. It is well documented that per-pupil expenditures in Connecticut are grossly inequitable, with a district such as New Britain able to expend an average of \$13,549 for its students, and other districts spending almost \$10,000 more per pupil! Our current system, which relies primarily on taxable local property with a supplement from the state, is exacerbating the gross inequities for students across Connecticut, worsened during COVID-19. It is intolerable and unsustainable to have so much of a child's life, their opportunity, their education, dictated by where they live.

Prior to and during COVID-19, OCA has worked with families across the state to help them access meaningful education for their children, eliminate barriers to school, and access needed services for children with disabilities. OCA requested from SDE chronic absenteeism data for students with particular disabilities and learned recently that between 40 and 50 percent of students with certain disabilities, including intellectual and other developmental disabilities, having been chronically absent from school during COVID-19. We await this data broken down by race, ethnicity, and school district. How will we make our children whole? How do we do right by them? Committing to a strategic plan to increase equitable opportunity for children is imperative and cannot wait.

We should also do the following:

1. Support/require use of state and federal stimulus dollars to implement remedial support services for all children; and ensure adequate directives are provided to school districts, along with financial support, for the extensive compensatory education legally required for students with disabilities.
2. Ensure adequate funding for the State Department of Education to enable it to oversee and enforce the educational rights of children, as required by federal special education law.
3. Require school districts receiving federal education stimulus dollars to allocate a portion of dollars to partnerships with community provider agencies that can assist with mental health screening, support and case management for children and families, and consider appropriating state funds to match these efforts.
4. Ensure that children across the state have access to developmentally appropriate, prosocial activities this summer.

Respectfully submitted,

Sarah Healy Eagan
Acting Child Advocate